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SUBJECT: VLORE: CENTER OF CIVIC ACTION

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The Citizen's Alliance for the Protection of the Vlore Bay, the "Vlore Alliance," an environmentally-focused civil society organization that works to protect Albania's central coast, has recently intensified efforts to push for reconsideration of large-scale oil storage and thermal power development in and around the Bay of Vlore. While the economic benefits of these projects stand unchallenged, the Alliance continues to raise concerns over the environmental impact on the bay's flora and fauna, as well as the thriving local tourist trade. This is a rare example of civic activism and grassroots democracy, seldom seen in Albania, particularly outside the capital city. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) A bustling city of 150,000, Vlore is the gateway to Albania's spectacular and undeveloped southern coastline and home to its deepest sea port. Approval for the construction of a major thermal power plant was inked by then-Prime Minister Nano in 2003 and approved by local leaders following limited public debate. Since that time, many citizens have become increasingly concerned regarding its environmental impact, and feel that their views continue to be inadequately addressed. Nonetheless, ground was broken on this project north of the city, as well as for an oil storage depot, in 2007. The thermal power plant is backed by international development financiers including the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

¶3. (U) Formed in early 2005, the Alliance has successfully raised awareness of its cause while failing to halt the project's development, leading it to use increasingly stronger tactics. The organization's early protest actions included filing complaints with local officials, hosting press conferences, peaceful protests around town and in Tirana, and requests for meetings with World Bank officials. In 2005 the organization collected 14,000 signatures in support of a referendum on development of the oil storage depot in Vlore, which was rejected by the Central Election Commission (CEC) because the project's site sits just beyond the city's border. The CEC Chairman has also said that the project, which was approved nationally by Parliament, cannot be the subject of a local referendum.

¶4. (U) Recently the Alliance raised the bar, blocking the road from Vlore to the "Soda Forest," as the construction site is known locally. (An old soda factory once stood in the forest where construction has begun.) For nine days in late December and early January, 50 - 60 people, mostly students, camped out on the road, surrounded by tires and other large debris, forcing traffic to detour through the city's outskirts until local officials called on police special forces to forcibly remove them. The protesters were jailed and released within hours. There were some accusations that the police used excessive force, but contacts among the activists told Embassy that force had not been used.

¶5. (U) In the context of Albania's energy supply and development, the 97 MW dual-source thermal power plant currently under

construction is a particularly important project, as it will diversify Albania's near total reliance on hydro-generated power and ease the current strain on energy resources. Currently approximately 97 percent of Albania's electricity comes from hydro power plants located in the north. Due primarily to severe droughts, the country has suffered a severe energy crisis for the past two years, including power shortages and load shedding, and in 2007 imported about 40 percent of electricity consumed. The Vlore thermal plant would diversify the supply both geographically and by source of production, improving future prospects for Albania's energy self-sufficiency.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Although the latest protest suggests shades of the more radical environmental movements of Western Europe, this is a home-grown initiative, although the Alliance received some technical advice from members of Croatia's Eko Kvarner Association. It is an unusually well-organized movement which is rumored to have support from the tourist industry and residential land developers who are protecting their own interests. A polluted bay or demolished wetlands would destroy further tourist potential in the area. Certainly Vlore's citizens have taken on the challenge of standing up to some industry giants and their own government with strong and well-coordinated action. Their example of civic involvement is encouraging in an emerging democracy that is more often characterized by apathy than belief that ordinary citizens can affect change.
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